

Last Man

by Michael P Calligaro

"Okay Houston, we'll see you again in just over an hour."

"Roger that, Intrepid. Houston out."

Eva pulled off her headset and let it drift beside her. Alex leaned back in his copilot's chair and took a deep breath. The first reusable space craft to orbit the moon--it was a momentous occasion.

Something nagged at his mind, causing him to frown. Why did that seem wrong? Didn't they have reusable moon-orbiting ships fifty years ago? He glanced back to ask the research scientists, Steve and Gary, what they thought, only to find that his and Eva's were the only seats in the cockpit.

His forehead tightening, he asked, "Eva, aren't we supposed to have two other passengers with us?"

Incredulously, she asked, "Where would we put them?"

Alex scratched at his neck. Where indeed?

"Are you feeling okay, Alex?"

Smiling weakly, he looked back at the stark white bulkhead and then to her. He almost lost himself in her dark eyes. While he'd love to be alone behind the moon with such a intelligent and level-headed woman, everything seemed wrong. "Sure. I must have just flashed back on another mission. I was thinking there were two other people with us."

She shook her head. "Well, the only other mission we've ever flown together was the last one, and we were alone then too."

Great, bring up the last mission. She'd rattled off idea after idea for getting the maneuvering thrusters back on line while all he could do was sit back in a panic and draw blanks. Being alone behind the moon with her didn't mean a thing. Even without her strict rules against dating astronauts, she'd never go out with someone so inept as him. Where she was brilliant and beautiful, he was dumb and ugly. He'd have to be the last man on Earth for her to consider making an exception.

He nodded dejectedly. "Yeah, I don't know what I was thinking."

His vision of the small cockpit jerked wildly to the left, though he didn't feel anything. He threw his gaze forward. "What was that?"

A male voice from behind asked, "What was what, Alex?"

Alex spun back around and found two people sitting in acceleration couches behind him and Eva. Gary looked concerned. Eva added her own worried expression. "Are you all right, Alex?"

Alex looked carefully from Gary to Eva. She didn't look at all surprised at Gary's and Steve's arrivals. And Gary didn't look surprised at appearing out of nowhere. Steve just ignored the three of them and stared out a viewport at the moon. With a deep breath, Alex nodded. "I'm fine. I just had a strange feeling of . . . well, sort of like *deja vu*, only different."

Gary nodded. "Interesting. You'll have to tell me more about it sometime. But right now," he unfastened

his harness and slapped Steve's leg, the impact sending his body drifting out of his chair, "Steve and I have to get to work." He grabbed a bulkhead by the door and pulled himself into the science lab behind the cockpit. Steve stared at the dark view of the moon a moment longer, then followed him. Eva pulled out a thin paperback and started reading.

An hour later she put the book down and gasped. The Earth rose majestically above the moon's harsh gray crust as they skirted around. Alex couldn't believe Steve and Gary had chosen to miss this. He'd been up here twice as many times as either of them, but views of the Earth from space still made his heart skip.

Eva let out a sigh. "I'll never get tired of that."

Alex looked at her in surprise. It seemed they had at least something in common. "I know what you mean."

She pulled on her headset and flipped the radio switch. "Hello, Houston. How's things?"

Silence.

Eva frowned and flipped the switch off and on again. "Houston? Come in Houston."

More silence.

Alex checked his readouts. "I show power going to the radio." He reached up and tapped the speaker above his head. "Turn up the volume."

She cranked it up until they could hear a slight hiss of static. The speakers were on. "Could our antenna have failed?"

Alex shook his head. "I doubt it. Turn it back down and I'll switch to backups." This also proved useless.

"Suggestions?" Eva asked.

"Let's bounce a signal off a satellite and send it back at ourselves. We'll be able to test both the send and receive."

She nodded. "That's a good idea. Can you program it?"

Proud of himself, he set to typing on the console at his right. He was happy to turn his back to her so she wouldn't see his blush at her praise. They ran the test and heard their transmission perfectly. "Maybe Houston's antenna is down. Try the Cape."

Eva tried everyone they could think of. No response. "I don't like this. I think we should scrub the mission and get down."

"We'll have to use the emergency vectors."

Shrugging, she said, "If no one is going to talk to us, we'll need to use them anyway."

"Let's give it one more orbit."

She frowned, then nodded slowly.

An orbit later they called Steve and Gary up to the cockpit and apprised them of the situation. Chagrined at needing to cut their tests short, but worried over the lack of contact with the Earth, they rushed back

to finish up whatever they could. Eva entered their changed flight plan into the computers and plotted a new course.

Eight hours later, they hit the upper atmosphere. Eva expertly guided them through and they raced toward Cape Canaveral. Everything seemed to be going normally when she uncharacteristically swore. "Shit!"

Alex jerked his head up and looked at her. "What is it?"

"Are your instruments showing something on the runway?"

They were too close to change landing areas now. He frantically checked and verified her reading. Something big was in the middle of their runway.

"Cape Canaveral, this is Intrepid. You've got to clear the runway. Repeat, you must to clear the runway." As had been the case since they came out from behind the moon, only silence responded. Eva looked frantically to Alex. "What do we do?"

He shook his head. Gary and Steve stayed silent in the back. Eva clenched her teeth and stared forward, her hand locked to the stick and her knuckles showing white. The runway came into view and they could see what was blocking them, a fire engine, parked right in the middle.

"Will we survive a collision with something that big?" Alex asked.

Eva shrugged and glared forward. "I don't know. I've never tried. Everyone hold on."

Alex gripped the arms of his couch and forced his neck back into the headrest. Trying to remember to keep breathing, he kept reminding himself that if anyone could pull off this landing, it was Eva. They touched down and she flared the flaps. The ship skipped hard, its wheels screeching. Seconds later, the impact with the engine sent a jar through the craft.

Alex felt the nose dip down as the front wheel struts collapsed. The craft pitched forward and a roar rocked them while a blinding light obscured everything. For an instant, though, the roar of the explosion sounded wrong, as if it had clipped out. It happened so fast, Alex couldn't be sure. Besides, more pressing concerns vied for his attention. The world flung itself about wildly, and he fought to keep his head pressed back into his chair.

Eventually they skidded to a halt upside down. Alex unbuckled himself and fell down to the ceiling. "Eva, are you okay?" She exhaled loudly and nodded to him. He tried to ask the same of Steve and Gary, but found their bodies charred. Through a large opening directly behind their seats, Alex could see the remainder of the craft separated and burning.

Eva disconnected her harness and dropped lithely to the ceiling. She glanced up at Steve's and Gary's bodies, then out the back of the nose, and stormed out. Alex rushed to follow as she marched toward the closest building. "I'm going to kill whoever left that engine in the runway" she said, venom dripping from her words.

She yanked on the door, only to find it locked. Without hesitation, grabbed a loose stone from the ground and smashed the door's window. Pushing aside glass shards, she reached through, unlocked the door, and flung it open. She stalked down the hallway looking for her first victim.

She didn't find any.

"Where the Hell is everybody?"

Alex could do little else but shrug.

They thoroughly searched the base, but found no one. After hitting the lockers and changing out of their space suits, they met back up in the parking lot. Eva looked resplendent in her jeans and t-shirt, with her long brown hair tucked under a NASA cap. "Anything?"

Alex shook his head. "I haven't seen a car go by."

"So what happened? Did they evacuate the area?"

"Well it wasn't a nuclear war. We were hardly out of radio contact for a hour and I don't see any destruction."

She shook her head. "No, definitely not that. We would have seen it from space. Suggestions?"

"I say we take one of these cars and go look for people."

"Keys?"

Alex suddenly realized he knew how to hot wire a car. Where did he learn that? More importantly, when? It felt like seconds ago. "Let me try something." He picked a nice looking '98 Vette who's doors were unlocked. With a little twiddling under the steering column, it started right up.

Eva leaned back in surprise. "Where'd you learn to do that?"

With a shrug, he replied, "I haven't always been a true blue government man. Do you want to drive or should I?"

She smiled. "That car? I think I'd better handle it. You take copilot."

The car squealed out of the parking lot, and she gunned it up to 90 before slamming on the brakes to spin them around a corner. Alex held on tight to the door handle. "Are you sure this is wise?"

"Who's going to pull us over? The longer I go without seeing anyone the more I think I'll kiss the first cop to try."

Though he understood what she was saying, he couldn't help but feel hurt by not being included in her "anyone." He tried the radio, but the seek ran through the dial twice before he turned it off. After a while she pulled into a gas station. He ran in and grabbed some snacks while she filled up the tanks. She'd just finished when he returned. "I see the stores still have food." He nodded and handed her a Twinkie, which she nibbled thoughtfully while looking around. "We have food until it rots and basically unlimited gas if it's just us using it. At least we won't be scrounging off the land. What we do beyond eat and sleep though, I'm not sure."

"I say we get a four wheel drive truck with extra gas tanks, fill it up with food, grab a good CB and go looking for people. Maybe not everyone is gone."

She nodded sadly. "No, maybe not everyone." Then she smiled at him. "And you're stuck with me."

Alex's heart raced, but he managed to croak out. "I could think of worse things."

She arched her eyebrows, then smiled. "But I never date astronauts." She waited for his face to fall before adding, "I guess it's a good thing you're no longer an astronaut."

* * *

They made a decent life for themselves. While Eva was brilliant, Alex grudgingly admitted he wasn't too dumb himself. Together they made an impressive array of devices for searching out other people. Those devices never turned anyone up, but the two of them did enjoy working together. In fact they thoroughly enjoyed doing everything together. In general, Alex was very happy with life. He just tried not to think about the future.

Unfortunately, the future thrust itself upon them. One day Eva came out of a supermarket with a big smile on her face and her hands behind her back. Alex had been lying out on the truck, enjoying the hot Nevada sun. He'd noticed she had been hiding something recently, like she wanted to tell him something, but held back. It looked like this would be the time. She stopped by the truck and beamed.

"I've got a surprise for you."

He got down and stared into her deep, dark eyes. "Yes?"

She held her hands out in front of her, showing a little white plastic thing with a pink end. "I'm pregnant!" She launched herself into his arms and hugged him tight. He returned the hug less enthusiastically and she noticed immediately. Braking off her embrace, she glared at him. "What's wrong?"

He leaned back against the truck and held his face in his hands. "You and I have been very happy. And I would love to raise our child with you. But what kind of life would we be leaving him?"

"Him?"

"He or she, whatever. He'll be alone after we die."

"So? We'll have more."

"How many? A hundred? And when they want to reproduce? Two people just can't populate the world. The gene pool is far too shallow."

She frowned deeply. "So what are you suggesting?"

"I don't know."

"Yes you do. You're suggesting we kill ourselves and be done with it."

"No! I just don't think we should subject our children to this empty place."

"Well, how can we ensure that? I'm not going to let this baby," she tapped her stomach, "grow big, just so I can rip her out with a coat hanger."

Alex cringed, not just at the image, but the way she shot her words at him like bullets.

Still frowning, she said, "So what is it? Are you suggesting we kill ourselves or not?"

He sighed and realized he didn't have any other options. "Maybe. Yeah, I guess that is what I'm suggesting."

She glared at him and tapped her foot. "Don't I make you happy?"

"Of course you do! There's no one on the planet I'd rather be with."

She frowned.

"No! You know what I mean. Before, when there were people here, I used to dream about marrying you and having kids."

"So what's wrong now?"

"You know what's wrong."

Her face fell and a tear dropped from her eye. "I guess I do." Her head down, she dragged her feet over to the driver's side of the truck and got in. She waited for him to slide into the copilot seat before starting the engine and easing the truck back onto the road. "Do you have a plan for how we'll do it?"

"I don't suppose it matters."

"Then I know how." She gunned the engine and veered off the road, sending the truck careening toward a cliff in the distance. "One more flight for us," she muttered.

Alex looked to the cliff and back at her. "Wait. We don't have to do this right now. We could spend a few more months together."

She gave him a look that sent shivers straight to his soul. Back when they were astronauts and he didn't have a chance with her, she'd never glared at him like this--not even the time he failed to help them get the maneuvering thrusters back online. Then, after they were left alone on the planet and they started really working together, she started to look at him with pride and love. Now, her eyes dripped disdain. Her whole manner asked, "Why did I waste the last year driving around with a loser like you?" He wouldn't live long, but if he had, he'd never forget that look.

She spoke, her voice at once angry and accusing. "Why? If we're going to kill ourselves anyway, I don't see any reason to wait. Let's just get it over with now. Forget the human race. They've obviously forgotten us." The truck bounced over a hill and she pushed harder on the accelerator.

"Please, Eva. Don't end it like this."

"What's it matter, Alex? If we're going to end it, what does it matter if we do it with me happy or mad at you? Afterward we're dead just the same."

As he watched the cliff approach, he tried to find where his thinking was wrong. But it wasn't. He wouldn't raise kids to die alone on a quiet planet. He and Eva had chosen to live their lives in the empty world, but he refused to subject their children to that. The cliff approached rapidly and Eva glanced at him, this time her eyes questioning if she should go on. He sighed and stared at her beautiful face, trying to remember it as it was when she was proud of, not disgusted with him. "I'm sorry, Eva, but this is the right thing to do."

A tear welled up in her eye and she let it run down her face. With a sniffle, she faced forward again and stomped on the accelerator, pressing it to the floor. The truck launched into the air and for one last time they felt freefall. Alex watched the ground approach with clinical disinterest. His life was about to end, but that was almost welcome. It would be good to get over this intense feeling of having let Eva down in some way.

The ground rushed up to the truck. Then blackness.

* * *

"Thank you Mr. Drisfield. That will be all." As the electro-hypno wore off, Alex's real memories came flooding back to him. He felt someone remove an apparatus from his head, letting him see a stark white

room full of recliner chairs with people wearing similar apparatuses. A few of the chairs were empty, but most of the people were still under.

"Did I pass?"

The attendant shrugged. "I just put you under. You'll have to ask the test proctor."

Alex stood up, and his head spun. The attendant, a burly fellow, grabbed his arm. "Careful there, Mr. Drisfield. It'll take a few seconds for your body to get used to its normal sensory inputs. Alex pushed the hand away and stumbled across the room to the woman with the clipboard. The stern eyes behind her horn-rimmed glasses bore into him and she set her lips in a straight line. "Well? Did I pass?"

Curtly, she said, "Come with me, Mr. Drisfield." He followed her down the hall to a room with a table. She sat down across from him and stared at her clipboard.

"I did pretty well, didn't I?" He asked eagerly. "I came up with some good survival techniques on my own. I'd make a good colonist."

She shook her head. "No, Mr. Drisfield, you wouldn't."

His heart sank. He'd failed. "Why not? I passed all the written tests with good scores. This one wasn't fair! By changing my memories I wasn't myself."

She sighed. "Mr. Drisfield, this test did exactly what it was supposed to do. It took away the things you knew and let us see who you really are. This wasn't a test of survival. That would have been trivial with all the food we left around. This was a test to see what you were made of."

"So what did I do wrong?"

"Mr. Drisfield, we're trying to find people to go live in gruelingly harsh places throughout the galaxy. Whole colonies might not survive. Or maybe you'll find yourself cut off from the Earth with no supply ship in sight and only minimal hope of one ever coming. What would you do then?" He opened his mouth and she shook her head. "Don't bother to answer. We know what you'd do. The test showed it implicitly."

He looked at his feet. "But that was different! There was no hope of anyone coming back."

"Really? How do you know? Did you ever figure out where everyone went? We certainly never told you. They might have been back the second your baby was born. Mr. Drisfield, we don't want your type, and this series of tests is designed to weed you out. We don't want people who rationally decide that the human race should be snuffed out. No, we want the kind of people who irrationally hold on to life by sheer force of will. We want people who know they're up against overwhelming odds, but will stubbornly fight those odds anyway. We're sending out colonies to insure the survival of our species. And we need survivors out there."

"But you just can't repopulate a world with two people."

"I don't care. We want people who will ignore what they can't do and try anyway."

Alex stood up. "I'll appeal this!"

She shook her head sadly. "You're welcome to try, but it won't do you any good. I'm sorry Mr. Drisfield, but you're just not the kind of person we're looking for."

The End

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